

Using Coaching to Improve Delivery of Counseling Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Coaching is an emerging form of professional learning. The article focuses on how coaching may be used to improve the quality of delivery of counseling instruction in the classroom.

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The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) has set forth new standards for effective professional learning. One of the main tenets of the standards is that professional learning, which refers to the improvement of instructional strategies and building of collegiality, should be ongoing and job embedded. NSDC's goal is that soon there will exist a culture where every educator engages in high quality professional learning every day (National Staff Development Council website, n.d.). The concept of coaching lends itself well to this goal in addition to being an effective tool for improving instructional

skills in the classroom.

Educators, including counselors, work in isolation every day. They interact with hundreds of people each day, but rarely observe or collaborate with peers (Robbins, 1991). In order for educators to improve their teaching skills, and more importantly, improve student learning, there must be communication between peers. Also, peer coaching can reduce the isolation many educators feel. Barkley (2005) stated, "By definition, excellence in teaching is a form of communication and group activity" (p. v). In addition to reducing isolation, peer coaching is being utilized for professional learning in many school systems because it capitalizes on schools' greatest resources – human resources.

What is Coaching?

What exactly is coaching, and how or why does it work? Peer coaching is defined by Robbins (1991) as "an avenue to develop a collaborative workplace where staff members interact freely to address curriculum and instruction, observe and teach each other, develop and analyze materials, plan and solve

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problems together" (p. III). For coaching to be effective, however, the coaching experience must exhibit quality. Glasser defined quality as "almost always includes caring for each other, is always useful, has always involved hard work... and it always feels good" (as quoted in Barkley, 2005, p.10). Effective coaching is an on-going dialogue between professionals, and coaching adds quality to school performance and environment. It is not evaluative in nature; rather it provides the coachee the opportunity for collaboration, observation, feedback and the chance to practice newly acquired skills. Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) describe the peer coaching process as one where peers observe one another in the classroom, gather objective data about student performance or teacher behavior, and then provide feedback in a follow-up conference. The coaching process, involving a pre-conference, observation, post-conference feedback, and reflection, can be a growth experience for both the coachee and the coach. Because coaching is a continuous process, it brings about changes in behavior. Sparks and Loucks-Horsley cited Shalway's research which showed that it takes 10 to 15 coaching sessions before educators can transfer what they have learned to their classroom practice. This also reflects the need for coaching to be an on-going process if the goal is to improve delivery of instruction.

It is important to differentiate the role of the coach from that of a mentor. Barkley (2005) provides clarification of the roles when he says

To me, the difference between mentor and coach can be equated to the semantic difference between the words "help" and "assist." Helping implies that

someone cannot fare well alone, that outside help is needed to succeed or come up to speed. Assisting someone implies that the person is quite capable but needs assistance to pull together a skill, knowledge, or behavior. Coaching acknowledges one's capabilities. It empowers one to bring strengths to fruition....It says, "You have strengths; let's discover them and fine-tune them, get them out into the classroom". (p. 25)

Counselors and Coaching

There are several reasons for counselors to become involved with peer coaching. First, counselors need to act as members of the instructional teams in their schools. When counselors are delivering guidance lessons they need to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their delivery. Through the process of coaching they can gain insight and feedback regarding their instruction. If counselors find that their instructional methods are not working, there must be a change in teaching strategies if there is to be an improvement in student learning. This means not only taking a superficial look at instructional methods such as organizational skill or curriculum content, but also analyzing the methods being used in classroom instruction. Bernhardt (2000) stated, "Too often, schools in this country conduct their education programs with little formal analysis of how well those programs work. Teachers and administrators rely instead on 'gut feelings' about what's working and what isn't" (p. 33). She contends that all educators should replace hunches with hypotheses, identify the real cause of the problems,

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assess the real needs, and address them. Peer coaching promotes an analysis of what is being done in the classroom and focuses on the instruction and not the instructor. By improving instruction, peer coaching may impact student achievement, and, when used to evaluate guidance programming, can also be part of the accountability component of the ASCA National Model (Bowers & Hatchett, 2002).

Second, while it is not the job of the school counselor to be in charge of the mentoring or peer coaching program, counselors can be a significant part of these programs. It is an opportunity for counselors to share expertise and model quality instructional practices and classroom management. Additionally, it may foster strong relationships with students and teachers which may assist in impacting student achievement.

Third, the basis of the coaching relationship is trust. There needs to be trust between those engaging in the coaching collaboration, and the trust of the principal and other members of administration must be gained so that adequate time and resources will be allocated to the coaching process. The building of trust and relationships is a strength area for many counselors. By participating in the coaching process, counselors can have an impact on the culture of the school by building collegiality with teachers and showing they are a part of the instructional team. As indicated by Bowman and McCormick (2000) teachers who participated in a peer coaching study made more favorable comments about professional growth than teachers who did not participate. Neufeld and Roper (as cited in the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2003) reported that:

The impact of coaching often goes beyond improving content instruction. The conditions, behaviors, and practices required by an effective coaching program can affect the culture of a school or system, thus embedding instructional change within broader efforts to improve school-based culture and conditions. (p. 2)

FORMS OF COACHING

Demonstration Lessons

One form of coaching is the demonstration of lessons. Demonstrating lessons can be extremely effective; however it also has some pitfalls. Feger, Woleck and Hickman (2004) stated that demonstrating lessons can only be impactful if all participants are engaged in the process. The coachees cannot simply sit in the back of the room; they must be directed to observe specific instructional strategies or classroom management techniques. In this way they are involved in what is happening. The observations then become the basis for the follow-up conference.

The elementary counselors in Hall County used demonstration coaching when the sexual abuse prevention program was implemented. The training was done through seminar presentation, which gave an overview of the lesson and the research behind the development, and was followed by demonstration lessons in a local school. The demonstration of the lessons developed the counselor's confidence in effectively delivering this sensitive material. In retrospect, the demonstration lesson was critical to the learning and delivery of the material because some

schools had only one counselor, eliminating the possibility of consulting with a peer about the lessons. The training experience could have been further enhanced by observing other counselors within the system and getting feedback on the delivery of these critical lessons.

Co-teaching Lessons

Co-teaching is another way to improve instructional practice. In this situation the coach and teacher meet prior to the lesson to plan together how to focus on the student learning goals, what questions and materials best support these goals, and on which aspect of the lesson the coachee would most like feedback. The coach provides as little or as much support during the lesson as requested or needed; this may entail modeling some questioning techniques during a class discussion or asking the coachee to shadow the coach as they listen in on small-group discussions and offer suggestions for further exploration to some children. After co-teaching, the pair discusses the lesson (Feger, et al., 2004).

Peer coaching

Another form of coaching which has become increasingly popular is peer coaching. Black, Molseed and Sayler (2003) describe peer coaching as involving "two or more teachers observing in each other's classrooms to hone their instructional skills...collaborating to enhance an area of instruction that the observed teacher wishes to study" (p. 65). Black et al. stated that some veteran teachers expressed fear about having someone observe them. The fear likely arises from the fact that teaching is a very isolated profession.

Black et al. shared that one teacher changed her mind about being observed when she realized peer coaching allowed the participants "to see not only themselves, but their students, in fresh ways...[and] because of their familiarity with both the students and the curriculum, their observations led to a deeper understanding of how they could improve their own practices" (p. 61-62). It appears the real value in this experience comes from the participants' on-going ability to reflect and collaborate about the skill(s) they chose to have observed. Because it's job-embedded and the expertise is on site, it is a cost and time efficient way to improve instruction and student learning. Harwell-Kee (1999) believes that the most effective coaching may occur at the end of the day while the day's events are still fresh in the participant's minds. Harwell-Kee also reports that participants often find that reflecting at the day's end is both energizing and mentally stimulating. Additionally, Harwell-Kee believes that the coaching process can and should take advantage of coaching opportunities that occur throughout the day, such as engaging in meaningful discussion between classes or even during lunch. Peer coaching can be used with counselors as well as with teachers.

DISCUSSION

Counselors sometimes wonder whether it is best to be involved in a coaching relationship with another counselor because they understand what counselors do. One counselor reported that her coaching experience outside the counseling department had been more rewarding and more effective than coaching within the counseling

department and it was an opportunity for public relations. She also felt that it gave her a better understanding of life inside the traditional classroom. The counselor believes her experience was enhanced because she chose to work with a math teacher. Having never liked nor been particularly good at math, observing this subject enabled her to focus on the skills that the teacher wanted observed without getting caught up in the story or activity, which might have been the case in a language arts class, for example. When contemplating participating in a coaching program, one needs to consider what would best meet one's own learning needs. It is also important, if supported by your local or district administration, not to be restricted to participating in coaching within your building. If, for example, one counselor wants to observe another counselor conducting specific programs, such as bullying, sexual abuse prevention or similar programs, and there is only counselor in each school, then observing a counselor at another school might be the best way to improve instructional delivery of that topic. Consider, however, participating in a variety of coaching relationships to gain a broader perspective about teaching styles.

SUMMARY

The essential component for a successful coaching program is that it be non-judgmental, non-evaluative and built on a foundation of trust and mutual respect. To be done correctly, it requires participants to engage in well-organized and clearly outlined professional learning to develop the skills to objectively gather data and provide feedback to the coachee. Coaching has increased in popularity as participants have seen the power and impact of the experience on their personal and professional growth and, more importantly, on student achievement.

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